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# THE TURNIP FIELD

## Prison Account Sweeps Yield Unexpected Results for Collections

By: Nial Raaen, Director of Trial Court Services, Michigan State Court Administrative Office

"Turnips!" exclaimed the judge sitting next to me at our annual judicial conference. "You can't get blood from a turnip!" It wasn't what I expected to hear, especially during the chief justice's presentation on court collections, but his reaction reflected the attitude that many court officials have about enforcing financial orders. Not long after the presentation, one Michigan court challenged that commonly held belief — with surprising results.

The 17th Circuit Court in Kent County, Michigan, already had an active collections program to enforce financial sanctions in felony cases. Paula Taylor, the court's finance division director, knew that the court was receiving restitution payments for crime victims from prisoner accounts. Taylor contacted the Michigan Department of Corrections (DOC) and learned that DOC would also deduct funds from prisoner accounts for other financial obligations upon receipt of a court order. As soon as the court began issuing orders, they started to see results.

Initially, prisoners were upset about the sweeps, and the courts received many inquiries from both prisoners and their family members. Now, many family members come directly to the court to make payments on the offender's behalf. Taylor reports that the 17th Circuit Court has collected more than \$418,000, and of the 3,949 sweep orders issued by the court, 1,832 accounts have been closed as paid-in-full.

Noting the 17th Circuit Court's success, the Michigan State Court Administrative Office (SCAO) contacted DOC representatives and reached an agreement on standards for statewide implementation of the sweep process. SCAO developed specialized forms to initiate and terminate collection of prior debt. For new cases, the order is included with the judgment of sentence, and collection can begin as soon as the offender is remanded to prison. DOC processes orders monthly and collects 50 percent of the funds the offender receives over \$50. DOC transmits funds to the court when they accumulate to at least \$100. To encourage other courts to participate, the SCAO hired temporary staff to prepare 886 sweep orders for 20 circuit courts. In addition, a special financial match program was developed that enables courts to match cases with outstanding balances against the DOC prisoner file to automatically generate collection orders. The program has matched 7,262 cases and generated orders for circuit courts in an additional 26 counties. So far in 2005, the 46-county sweep and financial match has already generated more than \$333,000 in fine and cost revenue from prisoner accounts. Beth Barber, SCAO's trial court collections project manager, credits the effort's success to cooperation between DOC officials and the courts and believes that the program will eventually become a regular component of collections programs.

The prisoner account sweep process is part of a growing list of collections initiatives being undertaken by the SCAO. These activities are funded with revenues from a consolidated criminal assessment created in 2003. For more information, contact SCAO Trial Court Collections Project Manager Beth Barber at [barberb@courts.mi.gov](mailto:barberb@courts.mi.gov) or (517) 373-5895, or Paula Taylor at [Paula.Taylor@kentcounty.org](mailto:Paula.Taylor@kentcounty.org) or (616) 632-5133. ♦

*I don't know what the future may hold,  
but I know who holds the future.*

Ralph ABERNATHY